

## Escaping Greece: ethnographies of Greek FSU migrants in times of crisis

### *Intro*

More than 25 years have passed since FSU Greeks started to abandon the collapsing Soviet empire in a massive way. Until today, scholars keep on researching their trajectories, as well as their socio-political substances that haunt their identity, which remains a mosaic of Greek, Pontic and post-soviet pieces (Popov 2016, Pratsinakis 2013, Voutira 2011, Lavrentiadou 2011). It is a mosaic that took shape not just through settling in Greece, a procedure falsely referred as "repatriation", but through various migrating strategies, adopted before the Greek crisis explosion back in the end of 2009 (Knight 2013).

Through our research, we examined the correlation between migrating practices with patterns of economic reproduction inside and outside Greek borders. Collecting data based on extended fieldwork, oral testimonies and bibliographical study, we tried to contest the linearity of narratives developed around "Greekness" or "Ponticness" and build up an economic ethnography resulting in the decomposition and formation of new diasporas (Van Hear 2003) in a transnational level. For this purpose we employed theoretical instruments of economic sociology, like Mark Granovetter's analysis on "embeddedness" (Granovetter 1985), as well as Alexandro Portes' works on economic sociology of immigration (Portes 1995). In order to create a post-soviet narrative required to legitimize our ethnography on FSU Greeks, Burawoy's and Verdery's (Burawoy and Verdery 1999) collected papers on post-socialist economies were a fundamental handbook. In this presentation however we will try to make a synopsis of our empirical data collected than a profound theoretical analysis.

### *Migration strategies before crisis*

Using the phrase "Escaping Greece", we aim to show the tendency to abandon homeland when the dept crisis that came to the fore after 2009/2010. It is however, the follow-up of various forms of immigration practices which took place from 1990's to 2010 inside the FSU diasporic communities. During all that period Greeks enjoyed their status as bilinguals, since Russian was the main communication language among them (Letsiou 2013). That was their major advantage in labor market as well as under the Greek-Russian commercial and informative exchanges. Their qualification as "privileged" (Voutira 2004) migrants is merely right considering the fact that during 1990's, those who did not choose poor rural areas for settling - benefiting the special, favorable conditions offered them by the Greek state (The identity of returnees emigrants from ex-Soviet Union, Ministry of Macedonia and

Thrace 2000), and chose urban migration (especially Thessaloniki city) or re-migration to other European countries, grabbed the chance to ensure and improve their livelihood through hard work or business activity. Informative and kinship networks, social capital accumulation (Faist 2000) facilitated their economic reproduction. Those who did not choose a "safe" permanent settlement in Greece were shuttling back and forth to Germany, Cyprus, Russia, the Caucasus area, and central Asian markets, either participating in work brigades, either establishing businesses that flourished or bankrupted. Taking advantage of kinship networks (Voutira 2012), numerous moved to Germany after completing the legal process of repatriation, a necessary step in order to obtain the Greek citizenship, the only passport to migrate to Europe. Many settled in Cyprus, which proved a better and more prosperous choice for living. The example of a small-scale economy based on remittances between the villages of Garderovski and Vitiazovo in Russia, Greece and Cyprus embodies a version of Popov's reflection on "transnational circuit" (Popov 2010). The driving force behind these circuits remained the kinship or other networks, a determinant factor in the formation of diasporic communities.

Nevertheless, even if these networks facilitated migrant's life conditions, the direction of the migratory flows depended considerably on the favorable or non-favorable general economic conditions of each period in the above-mentioned countries, as well as the decline or increase in certain sectors of the Greek and Russian economy.

In the middle of 1990's, the shuttle trade (*tchelnotchestvo*), was one of the main commercial activities among those who disposed a certain financial capital and the proper networks not only among Greeks but among various post-soviet people (Zabyelina 2012, Yukseker 2007). Part of what is generally referred as post-socialist "informal economy" (Morris 2016) circuits between dealers, traders, mediators and staff from local authorities were developed in Greece, Turkey and the ex-soviet Republics. The weak controls at the custom's offices, as well as the lack of supervision by the Greek authorities concerning FSU migrant's business activities, reinforced their presence not only into popular/flea markets but also in the export commerce of furs, fruits and other food products, and later in tourist industry.

Shuttle trade, which was a considerable phenomenon among post-soviet migrants during 1990's, partially due to the absence of tax and commerce regulations in Russian economy, declined in the first years of the new millennium, when the new authorities imposed several restrictions on the free trade and custom controls became stricter. Also, the goods became more expensive, when Russia devalued its currency in 2003, which had a considerable impact in the decrease of the shuttle trade (Kenan 2016).

Along with shuttle or suitcase trade, many FSU Greeks found opportunities of work and profit within the fur trade. A report of Greek Piraios Bank, published in 2012 (Dagalidis 2012) reveals the major role of Russophone Pontic Greeks as mediators between the producers of Kastoria city and the once enormous Russian niche. However, 'free-riding' phenomena (Dionysiadis 2016), as well as manipulation of prices by these same mediators, led the market into disrepute, even if these last 10 years there are some efforts to regain lost ground. The implication of FSU Greeks into fur market was also part of the informal sphere of economy, and this was mainly the reason that overvalued profit margins couldn't last forever. The 2nd reason is the increasing concurrence between the Greek and the Chinese fur industries (Dagalidis 2012).

These "informal zones" of trade in shuttle commerce and fur industry, mostly developed in a transnational level, have been replaced by more conventional commercial activities, thus exposed to state and fiscal controls, after the year 2000.

It is not just by chance that the fall of suitcase trade coincided with the birth of the new "Russian products" shops and the regard turning towards Germany, where in 1997, three Russian-Germans opened in Oerlinghausen the first MixMarkt shop. Since then, the MixMarkt brand has transformed into a chain, with 296 shops in Germany and Europe and 18 in Greece. In the beginning of the new millennium the need for "Russian products" stores was still strong and the general condition of the economy favored their spread mostly in the western regions of Thessaloniki, more inhabited by FSU Greeks than the city center or the eastern part of it. Among our informants, the ones who owned and worked in "Russian products" shops admitted that most of the food products for sale are sourced from suppliers mainly from Germany, where they can access goods at competitive prices.

Apart from the "Slavic memorabilia" food shops (Morris, Polese 2017), tourist industry has been one of the sectors with considerable growth, merely thanks to post-soviet entrepreneurs who believed in the dynamic of the Russian market. Besides, many FSU Greeks found a temporary summer post in tourist regions, inside hotels, agencies, transport companies, mostly in Khalkidiki. Once again, bilingualism was the "passport" for an easy entry into that market.

Transnational migratory practices that we have registered in that period, were related to the rise and fall of specific sectors of the Greek economy which constituted some of the major fields for FSU Greeks to earn their livelihood. Market economy, free mobility inside EU, Russia and Georgia, informal trade zones, double passports, weak controls from tax authorities in 1990's, proved as favorable conditions under which many FSU migrants drew their life trajectories.

## *Escaping Greece*

Even if the strong desire to "take roots" in Greece, expressed by many of our informants by the purchase of an apartment, plot or house (Lavrentiadou 2011), the worsening conditions in certain economic sectors, in addition to the unfavorable situation occurred of Greek crisis, resulted in an "escaping Greece" tendency, but not "movement". And that is not to mention the serious shortening in the solidarity structures and the work opportunities that were vivid all along the previous decades, inside diasporic communities. In Thessaloniki, apart from two or three cases of big entrepreneurs who even today recruit FSU Greeks, Pontic Greek businessmen tend to be concurrent in Greek or international market through rationality norms, avoiding human resources policies based on common origin criteria, which once reflected a moral premise.

On the background of a general worsening of life standards, escaping Greece does not result in a return to the land of birth, but an immigration towards countries that: a. promise better life conditions, b. host already established networks, c. are rumored to have better career perspectives.

As far concerning Greeks from Georgia's Tsalka- where after 2003-2004 Greek villages were mostly abandoned, the return is occasional and concerns only those who had not sell or rent their houses when they moved to Greece. Even in that case, that happens only during annual religious ceremonies (Tataridis 2017), or in summer period, and mostly by the elder population of villages, or those who have achieved to gain two pensions, one from the Greek and one from the Georgian state. In contrast, migrants who moved from southern Russia to Greece, kept strong ties with their birthplace, Essentouki, Mineralnye Vody, Krasnodar, Sochi, Novorossiysk, and a kinship network strong enough to welcome them back when the economic situation worsened in Greece. According to official statistics between 1989 and 2010 the Greek population of Stavropol and Krasnodar regions [*krai*] did not change considerably. Besides, the above-mentioned cities are considered, even today, more prosperous than Tsalka's infertile grounds. In Georgia, the last "soviet era" census of 1989, recorded more than 100.000 Greeks, 95.000 more than 2014. In the absence of real estate property and a safe living environment, FSU migrants who abandoned Greece, were keener on migrating to western Europe or big Russian urban centers, or southern Russia than Georgia or even Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In absence of official statistics, through our fieldwork observations, as well as our informants' narratives, Germany seems to be the more attractive destination for paid employment or business starting. Apart from some fragmented narratives, at that level of our research, a further analysis on the life courses of FSU Greeks of Germany, their habits, identity issues, professional careers, cannot be done. It is

however the next step of our research on economic activities of Greeks after soviet experience.

On the other hand, Russian urban centers remain until today a potentially promising option, mainly for FSU Greeks of university education. In the context of the brain drain, the outflow of human capital from Greece to Russia, is encouraged by Russian authorities and their effort to attract representatives of numerous post-soviet diasporic groups living outside the Russian borders (see the example of Germany : Kaiser 2013). Among these representatives, Greek presence is considerable. However for low-skilled migrants, under the lack of a kinship network, re-settlement in Russia, is not the best choice, since western Europe and Cyprus offers higher salaries and life conditions.

Another tendency in migration during crisis concerns particularly FSU Greeks who have bankrupted, our found themselves unemployed for longtime and need a new start. These migrants benefit on the extended family networks and do not have the option of choosing the new place of settlement; they just follow their relatives. They get installed in their relatives' houses, permanently or temporary, depending on the kinship degree. Through our research, migrants who experience the shock of financial crisis in Greece can be found in several cities of southern Russia, or Abkhazia's Sukhumi. Others use their double passport advantage and return in Caucasus regions in summers for seasonal peasant work or small trade. These transnational migrants try to accumulate capital in order to improve their living conditions in Greece.

### *Conclusions*

Through this presentation we tried to show the main factors of economic nature that determined migration practices of FSU Greeks since the collapse of the soviet empire. Our main argument was that capital accumulation, real estate property and informality were the three constituent substances that form a economic geography of FSU migrants based on rational terms. The need of further analysis through fieldwork in the re-settlement countries would be the ideal next step for our research project; the study of these new diasporic communities of Germany, Cyprus and Russia would certainly be a challenge.

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Statistical data :

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